Request for proposals

# Evolving Toronto's Community Coordination Plan

United Way Greater Toronto

15 December 2021

# 1. Invitation

United Way Greater Toronto (UWGT) is inviting qualified consultants with experience and knowledge in the non-profit sector, place-based and collective impact approaches, as well as evaluation and research to engage diverse stakeholders and review the opportunities and lessons learned with the goal of recommending a future state model to guide the evolution of the Community Coordination Plan (CCP) as communities emerge from the pandemic.

# 2. Context

## Background:

United Way and the City of Toronto moved quickly in late March 2020 to establish a new model of partnership and collaboration to enable rapid response and collaboration with the non-profit sector in response to Covid-19. The model was designed to be flexible and iterative, allowing for locally responsive work. Over time United Way and the City have adapted a number of elements of the original model as a result of informal feedback and an evaluation with agencies, cluster leads and key stakeholders conducted between April and September 2020. (See Appendix for executive summary of evaluation report.)

As a joint partnership between United Way Greater Toronto (UWGT) and City of Toronto's Social Development, Finance and Administration division, the CCP functions as a social services sector response to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 on communities experiencing vulnerabilities in Toronto, through coordination and communication between City of Toronto, UWGT, and community organizations. Through the convening of these 'cluster tables', communities were able to better respond to the emerging needs of people experiencing vulnerabilities throughout the pandemic.

As of Fall 2021, the CCP consists of ten geographic clusters and two population-based clusters (Newcomer and Black Resilience) and is overseen by a joint United Way and City of Toronto management team which supports the operation of the model and receives and acts on issues escalated from the clusters. Covid-19 response funding from the City of Toronto and United Way has also enhanced the work of the Clusters, allowing for provision of additional administrative supports locally and enabling agency partnerships to emerge and tackle key Cluster table issues.

CURRENT MANDATE OF THE CCP:

The mandate of CCP has been evolving since the pandemic began given changing needs. The following are the ongoing key objectives:

- To facilitate a streamlined communication process between City of Toronto and United Way and community clusters that:
  - (1) Provides information and resources to community clusters on a wide range of topics related to rapid response, including funding opportunities and resources (e.g. donations), and emerging social issues and trends, and
  - (2) Enables urgent and other issues to flow from community clusters to City of Toronto and United Way for escalation and response
- To ensure funding, resources and cluster activities target the equity-deserving groups and geographic areas of increased vulnerability
- To facilitate coordination, communication and problem-solving among local community organizations regarding responses to urgent and other identified needs
- To provide coordination and decision-making support to community clusters through challenging phases and transition of the pandemic
- To facilitate learning across clusters and scaling of solutions
- To enable local partnerships between agencies and across sectors/institutions to address ongoing issues

# 3. Purpose

The consultant will deliver a future state recommendation for the CCP (including a model, mandate and operational structure) to United Way and the City of Toronto based on the insights gathered from staff and sector partners.  In addition, the selected consultant will consolidate a final report that encapsulates key reflections/rationale, insights, learnings and challenges in support of the final future state recommendation.

As United Way Greater Toronto and the City of Toronto emerge from the pandemic and work towards recovery and rebuild, it is important that further engagement and review helps us answer the following:
- What elements of the current model and mandate were successful and what challenges have been experienced to date?
- What are the top priorities for the City of Toronto & United Way to incorporate into the future state model? How might the Community Coordination Plan evolve to address non-Covid-19 priorities and what elements of the current model would support this?
- What appetite is there among community agencies to participate in a future state or post-Covid-19 structure?  What issues and priorities are most salient for community partners, United Way and the City of Toronto to address together?
- What should United Way and the City of Toronto consider about their future roles to deliver on the future state? (for example: capacity building, funding, network coordination and outreach, equity and reconciliation priorities, place-based approaches, etc.)

- What is the alignment and connection of the future state model to other United Way, government and community sector strategies, tables and forums?
- What resource considerations (for example: staffing) are needed for United Way and City of Toronto to enable success of the proposed model?

# 4. Scope of work

For this contract, an external consultant will work collaboratively with a joint team from UWGT and the City of Toronto to:

   i.   Lead reflection and review process to understand the **strengths and challenges of the current model.**

   -   Building on the findings from previous evaluation report, conduct interviews and utilize surveys/focus groups to engage with the sector and other key stakeholders to determine key successes of CCP and opportunities for the future

   ii.   Work with United Way, City of Toronto and key partners to understand **key elements of a proposed future state** that resonate with partners.

   -   Review other relevant City of Toronto and United Way strategies (such as Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy, For Public Benefits, etc.) as well as other sector strategies (such as mutual-aid networks, neighbourhood pods and ambassador models) to determine their relevance to the future of the CCP

   iii.   **Recommend required enabling supports and considerations** for United Way and the City of Toronto to ensure the success of the future model based on reflections gleaned

   iv.   **Synthesize findings into a final report** which includes key aforementioned items (reflections/rationale, insights, learnings and challenges in support of the final future state recommendation) including any recommendations regarding evaluation and data collection to support recommended model

# 5. How the findings from this project will be used

As aforementioned, the findings from the project will:

- Be used to inform the 2022 transition of the model to its future state and to support a clear articulation of the change from the current state
- Clarify potential additional considerations for United Way and the City of Toronto regarding resources, staff roles, evaluation, strategic alignments, etc.
- Contribute to our knowledge base around place-based work and how other institutions are realigning their convening work in light of the receding pandemic

# 6. Consultant role and relationship with UWGT

The consultant will report to UWGT's Interim Director, Community Connections – Juneeja Varghese, [jvarghese@uwgt.org](mailto:jvarghese@uwgt.org) - who will have the direct management responsibility of this project.  The consultant may work with a joint working group comprised of staff from the City of Toronto and United Way.

# 7. Timelines and deliverables

| | |
|---|---|
| RFP released | 15 December, 2021 |
| Proposal submission | 17 January, 2022 |
| Selection and awarding of contract | Week of January 31, 2022 |
| Initial meeting with UWGT as well as joint UWGT/City of Toronto working group | Week of February 6, 2022 |
| Conclusion of recommendations | April 2022 |

# 8. Consultant qualifications and considerations

- Demonstrated in-depth knowledge of the community, non-profit and funding environment.
- Knowledge or familiarity with funding and government programs and initiatives that operate at the neighbourhood scale, as well as initiatives and programs launched during Covid-19
- Ability to work collaboratively and engage diverse stakeholders
- Experience in research methods and data analysis
- Experience in articulating program components and models related to the funding in the public and non-profit sector
- Ability to manage projects to meet deadlines and deliver high-quality deliverables.

# 9. Proposal requirements

The Proposal should not exceed 2,000 words in total, including details on how the budget will be used. Type size should be 12 pt. The following specific content should be included in the proposal:

**Name and contact information**

**Reference Information**

- Short description of the applicant's work, including experience in projects involving documenting community-based initiatives and/or funding models and experience in engaging diverse stakeholders in review/evaluation activities. A list of similar projects currently or previously undertaken can be included.
- Names and contact information of three references for whom the applicant has completed relevant projects.
- 1-2 examples of final reports written by the applicant

**Proposal**

Overview of the applicant's understanding of the scope and requirements of the project, and the approach that the applicant will take.

- A work plan that takes into account the deliverables and implementation timelines.
- A breakdown of the tasks, showing the amount of time each member of the consultant team will spend on this project.
- A budget for the total cost of the work, including all personnel, materials, and other expenditures.

# 10. Budget

A maximum of $20,000 inclusive of taxes, with justification through daily consultancy rates.

# 11. Application deadline

Please submit one (1) electronic copy of your proposal before 5pm on January 17, 2022 to:

Juneeja Varghese
Interim Director, Community Connections
United Way Greater Toronto
Email: jvarghese@uwgt.org
Subject/Reference: Evolving Toronto's Community Coordination Plan

# 12. Questions/inquiries

Please contact Juneeja Varghese at jvarghese@uwgt.org by January 14, 2022 if you have any questions regarding this RFP.

# Appendix

# Evaluation of the Community Coordination Plan (CCP) during the COVID-19 Pandemic's First Wave

# Executive Summary



This report covers reflections and insights gathered from April to September 2020

Prepared by

Biljana Zuvela, United Way of Greater Toronto
Lora Remacka and Safiah Chowdhury, City of Toronto
Andrew Taylor and Vashisht Asrani, Taylor Newberry Consulting
December 3, 2020

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# 1. Introduction

As the risks of COVID-19 began to be realized, and both the Province of Ontario and the City of Toronto moved to lockdown to contain the virus, a critical question emerged - what about vulnerable populations? Residents already living in precarious situations, including homeless populations, newcomers, those in isolation, and beyond, would be disproportionately impacted by the emergency provisions. Additionally, the community sector itself entered a new level of crisis management to meet the needs of Toronto's most vulnerable community members. Community organizations had to instantly change to online social service delivery or implement physical distancing measures. Daily coordination, information, issue escalation and resources were vital for community agencies to help their community members in real time. From this, the Community Coordination Plan (CCP) was born.

**This report presents key findings and learnings from the CCP's evaluation based on consolidated data** collected through multiple data collection tools from April to September 2020. The CCP evaluation **was conducted with the purpose of documenting the CCP's unique experience of supporting** communities and vulnerable populations under exceptional circumstances caused by COVID-19. It also served as a way to honour and support community agencies, the City of Toronto and UWGT staff who have done extraordinary, heroic work under very challenging and complex circumstances.

# 2. The Purpose of the CCP

Consisting of ten geographic clusters, one city-wide cluster, and one population-based cluster, the purpose of the CCP model was to ensure that the emerging needs from vulnerable communities are addressed in a timely manner through the coordinated, collective efforts of the City of Toronto, UWGT, community organizations, Councillors offices, and other stakeholders who can leverage and share resources promptly and effectively.

The CCP structure from Spring 2020 is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Community Coordination Plan Structure: Spring 2020
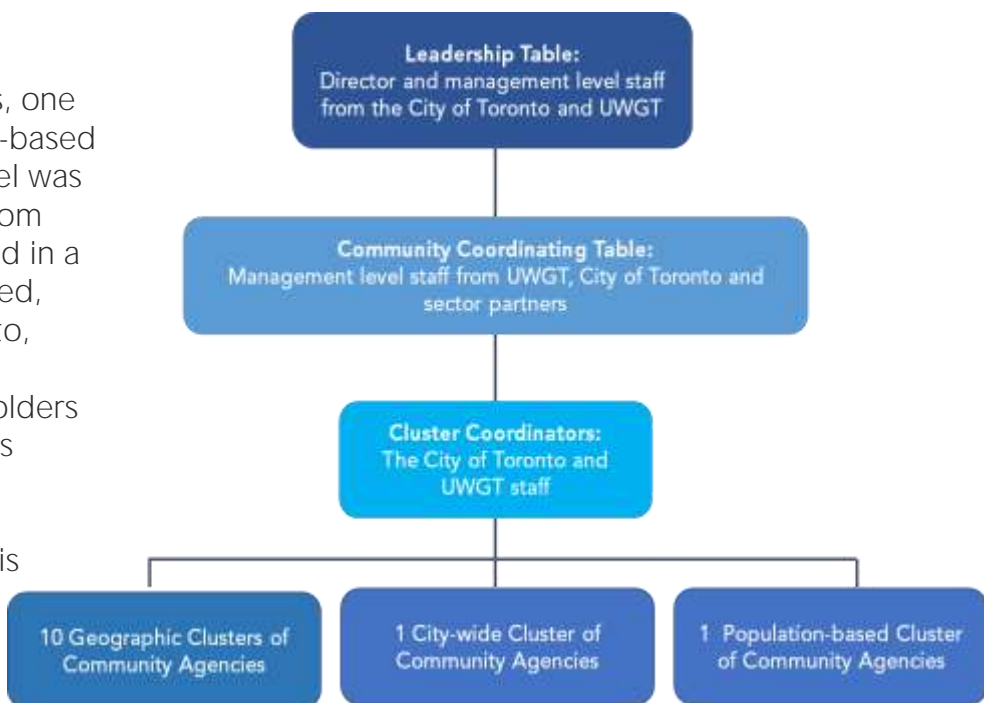
# 3. The Evolution of the CCP

As the CCP's initial purpose was to address the urgent and immediate needs of vulnerable individuals and households arising as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an intentional focus on agencies and organizations providing direct, frontline service. For this reason, the original focus of the CCP did not have the infrastructure to support resident engagement.

With new and different data sources, such as disaggregated data from Toronto Public Health on COVID-19 infection rates, the CCP evaluation data from group reflection sessions, surveys and interviews and ongoing conversations with the community, the CCP shifted to a more deliberate focus on responding to equity and systemic concerns. As more data became available about needs and distribution across clusters, the allocation of donations and other similar resources became more targeted to ensure all parts of the city, especially those historically underserved, were prioritized in an equitable manner.

Further targeted conversations and a more specific focus on what the sector can achieve together also became the focus as opposed to a general approach to tackling all social equity issues arising from COVID-19.

# 4. The CCP Evaluation

## 4.1 Evaluation Purpose and Scope

The purpose of the evaluation process was to generate insights into the effectiveness of the model in responding to the emerging community needs and to document the key learnings from its development and implementation. The evaluation questions that guided the evaluation process covered the CCP's context, implementation processes and outcomes. Evaluation learnings are intended to support the further development of the model.

The evaluation findings have been used to adapt the model in real time and to inform more coordinated efforts in addressing community needs as the work of the community service sector transitions to recovery and re-imagining post-crisis mode.

*"As the crisis unfolded, the needs shifted, and the discussion shifted to reflect that. It did eventually incorporate more of the systems piece, which I think is so important. For many community agencies, the needs of the pandemic are needs we have had all along. I hope we can evolve in the longer term to recognize these longer standing needs, grounded in the emergency, but unearthed because of it."*

*CCP Cluster Coordinator*

## 4.2 Evaluation Methods and Approach

The evaluation process was designed to work in a highly flexible way by selecting "low-burden" data collection methods that could lift up actionable insights and provide immediate value to stakeholders.

A mix of qualitative and quantitative data collection tools was used, starting with meeting observations and analysis of secondary data during the most intense period of the CCP work and then moving towards more structured methods such as group reflection sessions, surveys and interviews as time and circumstances allowed.
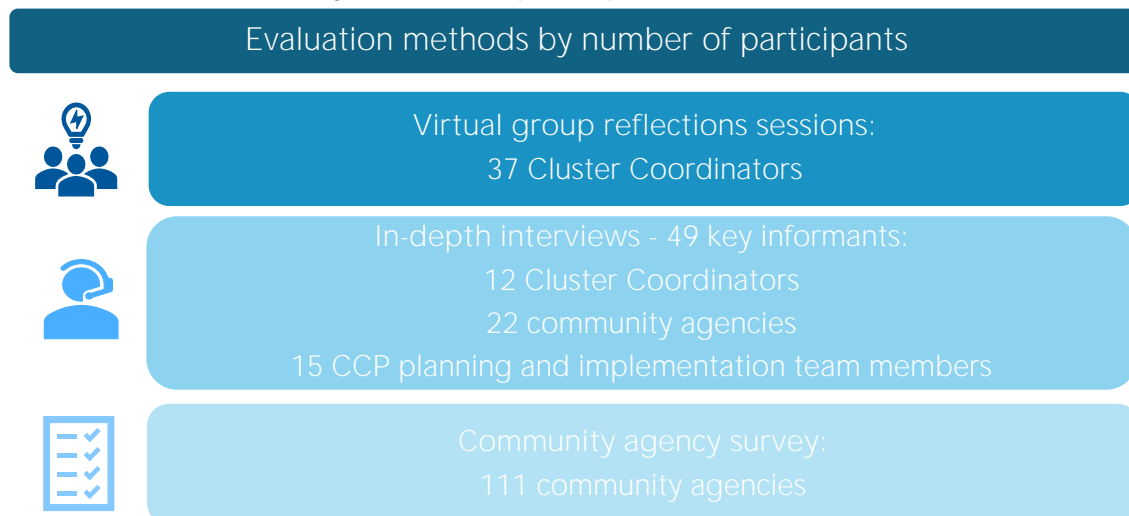
Figure 2 shows the number of participants who participated in the group reflection sessions, in-depth interviews and the survey for community agencies.

## 4.3. Limitations

When reading through these findings, it is important to remember that the CCP was evolving quickly as data was gathered. Most of the qualitative data presented here, for example, was gathered between May and July, as areas for refinement of the model were identified. The City of Toronto and UWGT have been informed of the feedback gathered through in-depth interviews with key informants, surveys for community agencies and group reflection sessions with Cluster Coordinators. Consequently, some of the challenges raised in those interviews have since been addressed.

A large and diverse range of stakeholders had input into this evaluation process, through the survey and through in-depth interviews, but it is important to remember that their feedback may not be representative of everyone involved in the CCP.

Figure 2. Evaluation methods by number of participants

| Evaluation methods by number of participants |
|---|
| Virtual group reflections sessions: 37 Cluster Coordinators |
| In-depth interviews - 49 key informants: 12 Cluster Coordinators 22 community agencies 15 CCP planning and implementation team members |
| Community agency survey: 111 community agencies |

# Key Evaluation Findings

## 5. What has Impacted the CCP Implementation?

The evaluation process generated a great deal of feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of the CCP initiative. Some of these comments focused on strengths or weaknesses of the initiative's design. Others identified ways in which the CCP was constrained or enabled by the very unique context within which it was launched. There were also contextual factors and components of the CCP design that had a dual role and stakeholders described them as both helpful and challenging at the same time. The contextual factors are not within the CCP's direct control, but they shaped the process in important ways, and should be considered carefully in making decisions about the CCP's future. Table 1 provides an overview of contextual factors and key components of the CCP design that impacted the CCP's success and shaped the experience of the CCP stakeholders.

Table 1. Overview of relevant factors that impacted the CCP's implementation process

| Contextual factors that shaped the CCP | Key components of the CCP design |
|---|---|
| Enabling factors:<br>• The good will and motivation to collaborate among stakeholders<br>• The sense of urgency brought on by the crisis<br>• Political will | Strengths:<br>• Partnership between the City of Toronto and UWGT<br>• The CCP structure and established communication process<br>• A platform to raise concerns safely<br>• Ability to adapt quickly to changing conditions and practical community needs<br>• Skilled Cluster Coordinators<br>• Working across silos/multi-disciplinary response<br>• Support provided by the City of Toronto and UWGT<br>• Focus on monitoring and evaluation |
| Constraints:<br>• Limited and evolving knowledge of the pandemic<br>• Rapid learning curve for Cluster Coordinators<br>• Evolving, intersecting crises<br>• Pre-existing City's policies | Challenges:<br>• Lack of clarity or consensus on some aspects of purpose and priorities<br>• Lack of clarity for some functions and roles<br>• Limited consideration of resident voices and the voices of grassroots organizations<br>• Limited ability to respond quickly to complex issues, including issues of racism and equity |
| Contextual factors with a dual role:<br>• A diverse range of organizations with differing needs and capacities<br>• Differing histories of collaboration across neighbourhoods | Key components with a dual role:<br>• Large volumes of information |

## 5.1 Why has the CCP Worked?

The CCP was designed by a team with **strong connections to Toronto's community** service sector, and its design reflects an appreciation of how the sector works and how best to support it during the COVID-19 crisis. Key factors in the design included:

- Partnership between the City of Toronto and UWGT and support they provided to community agencies. This partnerships served as a real catalyst for stakeholders who believed in collective community power and provided a space and support for it. This lent the CCP a level of credibility in the community that made many things possible.
- The CCP structure and established communication process. The CCP tables (e.g., leadership table, community coordinating table), a combination of geographical, city-wide and population-based clusters and regular meetings enabled coordinated efforts to meet emerging community needs on the ground. Frequent and transparent communication through different channels helped community agencies access resources and know where to find relevant information to serve their communities well. The City of Toronto and UWGT acknowledged their limitations and engaged community agencies as partners. Even when concerns raised by tables were not addressed, they were documented and shared.

- A platform to raise concerns safely. The CCP created a safe platform for community agencies to be heard, share and identify solutions for emerging community issues with each other, the City of Toronto and UWGT. It also provided them with an opportunity to be the voice of their communities at the table, and get assistance (resources, information, funding, etc.) to meet the needs of the residents they serve.
- Ability to adapt quickly to changing conditions and practical community needs. The CCP changed in many ways through time, as roles were clarified, the frequency and format of meetings evolved, and new stakeholders became involved. The substantive focus of the initiative also evolved, from more pragmatic focus on essential services to meet basic needs to include discussions of issues such as systemic racism, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the differential effects of COVID-19 on people of colour and other vulnerable groups.

*"The CCP has always been a model that had a capacity to iterate and be refined over time. Through weekly tracking summaries we had a regular list of needs and ways to be able to meet those. As soon as we heard those issues being identified we would immediately escalate to the City to see what resources we could offer. We went through the constant evolution of being able to refine the use and function of the CCP in order to accommodate the needs."*
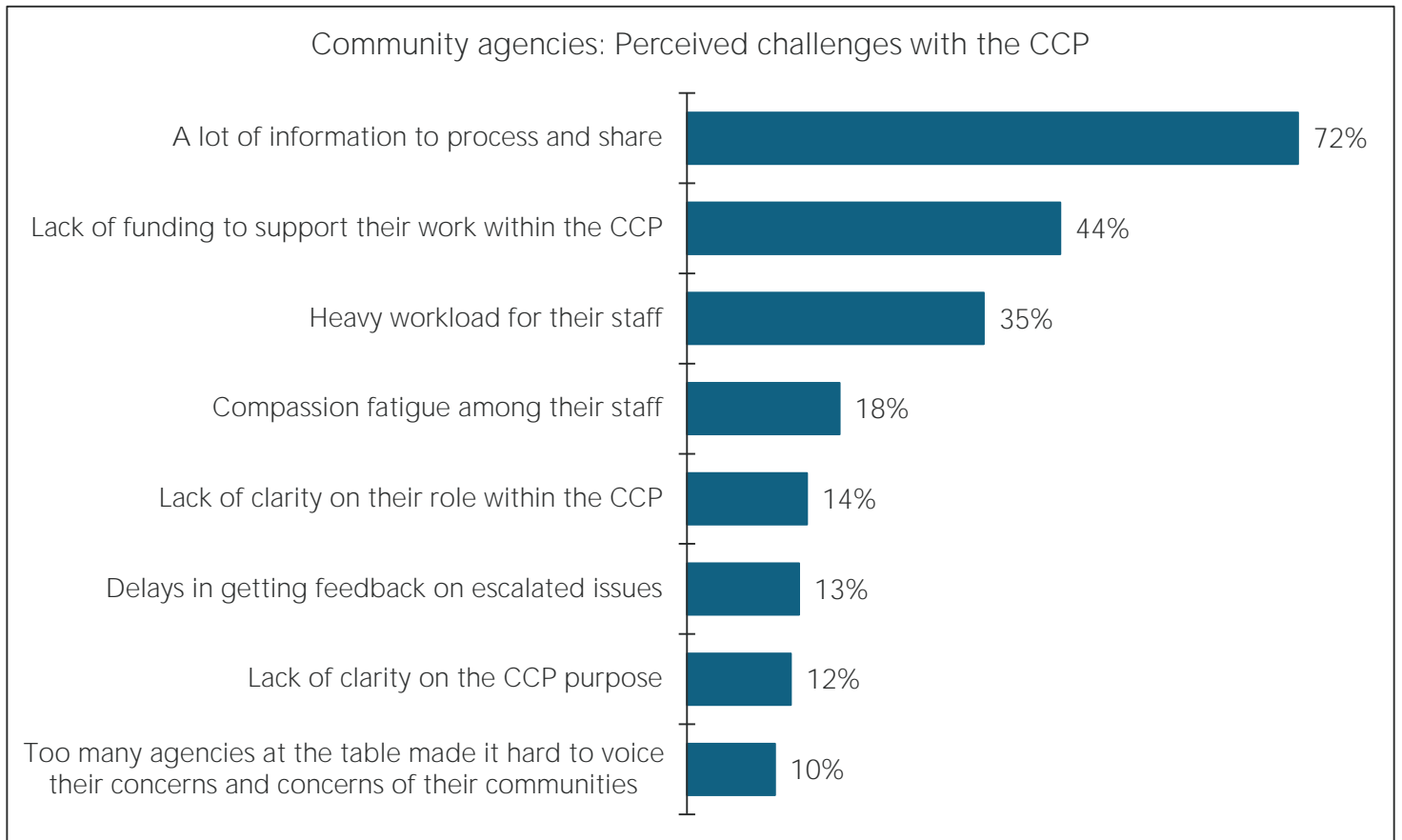*CCP Planning and implementation team member*

- The multi-disciplinary, cross-silo approach. Staff from many departments at the City of Toronto and UWGT were thrown into new roles during the early weeks of the crisis. Community agencies of different sizes, capacities and interests were brought together to share information and resources and to problem solve. The CCP became a hub of communication, where staff from UWGT, the City of Toronto and community agencies with diverse expertise could come together to collaborate.
- Skilled Cluster Coordinators. The CCP identified community clusters across Toronto based on existing geographical boundaries, local planning tables and the allocation of staff who have place-based knowledge, expertise and connections. In the role of Cluster Coordinators, the staff used their knowledge, skills and flexible approach to facilitate the work of their clusters. Many community agencies highlighted the Cluster Coordinators' facilitation and listening skills as one of the key factors for the success of the CCP. These skills helped build trust with community agencies and encouraged innovations to solve problems collectively.
- Focus on monitoring and evaluation. From the beginning, both the City of Toronto and UWGT invested resources in monitoring the progress and documenting the work of the CCP. This helped to ensure that up-to-date information about needs, emerging issues and donations was available quickly, and evaluation insights were used to support the evolution of the CCP.

- The good will and motivation to collaborate among stakeholders. All stakeholders showed a significant level of motivation to coordinate their efforts, to partner, share information and resources and learn from each other to ensure that their services are delivered quickly and the needs of vulnerable people in the community are met in the most efficient way.
- The sense of urgency brought on by the crisis. A shared sense of urgency caused by COVID-19 triggered a special sense of bonding, trust, creativity and connections between community agencies, the City of Toronto and UWGT. It also helped mitigate typical power dynamics between the community agencies and UWGT and the City of Toronto as their funders and opened the space for solidarity and deeper partnerships between them.
- Political will. The entire establishment of the City, UWGT, and hundreds of community partners were singularly focused on the same mutual purpose: responding to the pandemic. Hundreds of staff were redeployed, and resources was redirected for the CCP. This concerted focus enabled problem solving on an unprecedented scale and is unlikely to be replicated in most other instances.
- Access to information. A large volume of information was shared through the CCP, which contributed not only to the efficient response to the community needs but also to building and maintaining trust with the community agencies. However, many stakeholders found the amount and the intensity of information sharing overwhelming.

## 5.2 Where has the CCP Struggled?

According to the survey of participating community agencies, the biggest challenges they experienced with the CCP were information overload, lack of funding to support their work within the CCP, and heavy workload for their staff. Compassion fatigue, lack of clarity on purpose and roles, and delays in getting feedback were also identified as challenges by some (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Challenges with the CCP experienced by community agencies

**Community agencies: Perceived challenges with the CCP**

| Challenge | Percentage |
|---|---|
| A lot of information to process and share | 72% |
| Lack of funding to support their work within the CCP | 44% |
| Heavy workload for their staff | 35% |
| Compassion fatigue among their staff | 18% |
| Lack of clarity on their role within the CCP | 14% |
| Delays in getting feedback on escalated issues | 13% |
| Lack of clarity on the CCP purpose | 12% |
| Too many agencies at the table made it hard to voice their concerns and concerns of their communities | 10% |

*Source: Survey for community agencies, N = 111*

Additional evaluation data collected from Cluster Coordinators and CCP planning and implementation team members confirmed challenges identified by the community agencies and highlighted some other challenges. Some of these challenges are understandable given the speed at which the CCP was launched, the complexity of community conditions at the time and uncertainties caused by the COVID-19 crisis. At the same time, many of the challenges faced by the CCP are reflections of long-standing issues in Toronto's efforts to address social problems.

- Lack of clarity or consensus on aspects of the model and roles. Stakeholders sometimes had differing expectations around what the CCP was designed to achieve, its scope and where it should devote its resources. Given how quickly the initiative evolved, and the diversity among participating community agencies there were sometimes inconsistent understandings of key functions and roles. Some community agencies were very active in trying to problem solve collaboratively, while some limited their actions to information or resource sharing. Some Cluster Coordinators saw their role as primarily passing on issues up the line to the City and the UWGT for them to act, while others saw their role as being a facilitator to problem solve with the local agencies in their cluster.
- Limited ability to respond quickly to complex issues, including issues of racism and equity. As the COVID

pandemic evolved into a broader health, economic and social crisis dealing with issues like poverty, racism, employment and housing, the CCP was able to act as a forum for frank and constructive discussion among community agencies about these issues, and a conduit to pass the insights from these discussions on to senior leadership at the City of Toronto and at UWGT. Arguably, the CCP was a catalyst for a new kind of dialogue about some of these issues, wherein community agencies and funders could speak more openly and in a more truly collaborative way. However, the CCP originally was focused on providing pragmatic support to respond to the essential community needs caused by the COVID-19 crisis and therefore was not designed or intended to undertake significant actions on these kinds of issues.

- Limited consideration of resident voices and the voices of grassroots organizations. The CCP was designed to focus on building the capacity, connections and coordination of community agencies. It was not intended as a mechanism to directly engage residents and grassroots organizations in meaningful dialogue about the pandemic and how the city should respond. However, it can be difficult to clearly separate the two, especially when working at a neighbourhood level, during a crisis that was having a disproportionate impact on those who were already among the city's most vulnerable residents.

- Heavy workload and large volumes of information. The workload of the CCP agencies was very heavy and large volumes of information were shared to ensure responsiveness to the emerging community needs. This, plus ongoing struggles to balance personal and professional responsibilities while responding to the crisis has significantly increased the risk of burnout for many CCP staff members.
- Limited and evolving knowledge of the pandemic. What was clear from the beginning of the pandemic was that our communities were facing a crisis that was more far-reaching, complex and impactful than any other crisis we have experienced or contemplated. The community organizations witnessed startling increases in the number of people needing their assistance in goods, services and information while having limited knowledge and experience of the pandemic or confusing information about how to deal with it.
- Rapid learning curve for Cluster Coordinators. To accomplish complex tasks in a chaotic environment full of unknowns and uncertainties, the CCP needed a large number of Cluster Coordinators. Some of the Cluster Coordinators had extensive experience with community consultation and grassroots planning, but others did not. This meant that some coordinators faced steep learning curves or were more effective in some parts of the role than others.

- Evolving, intersecting crises. Long-standing issues such as homelessness, inadequate mental health supports, isolation, and chronic underfunding of the community sector became more pronounced in the pandemic. The CCP model, as an emergency provision, was not intended nor equipped to solve these issues but it did achieve some success in ensuring that they remained on the radar of City and UWGT leadership.
- Pre-existing City policies. Many stakeholders felt that the pre-existing City policies and processes created stumbling blocks for resolving some of the identified issues, caused delayed responses to critical needs and a lack of timely feedback loops on escalated issues. While they acknowledged that some of these delays were inevitable under the circumstances, they also felt that the municipal bureaucracy could have moved more quickly at times.
- A large and diverse range of community organizations with differing needs, capacities and histories of collaboration across neighbourhoods. The membership of the CCP tables reflected the diversity of community agencies in Toronto, which brought a lot of rich insights and creative solutions for addressing emerging community needs. However, balancing those tensions and trying to create more equitable space in a way that met the needs of all members was a challenge named by Cluster Coordinators and community agencies.

# 6. What are the Major Outcomes of the CCP Work?

Overall, the CCP was a positive experience for all stakeholder groups and resulted in significant benefits for the community agencies and the communities they serve, for the City of Toronto and UWGT, and for the community service sector. As one of the community agencies commented:

*"COVID is not something we wanted, but there are positives that came out of it and hopefully we can maintain those positives."*

Table 2. Overview of the major outcomes of the CCP work

| Community agencies | Communities /Residents | City of Toronto and UWGT | Community service sector |
|---|---|---|---|
| • Increased access to Information and improved knowledge<br><br>• Increased access to resources and funding<br><br>• Strengthened existing partnerships and established new ones<br><br>• Improved ability to respond to the emerging community needs in a more coordinated or innovative way<br><br>• Enhanced referral channels and service delivery capacity | Better access to:<br>• Goods (e.g., food and food related supplies, PPE, technology, personal hygiene items)<br>• Information (e.g., health related information, information about CERB benefits)<br>• Services such as resources and skill development opportunities to residents (e.g., programs to address the increase in domestic violence during COVID-19, cooling centers for the homeless in some clusters) | • Strengthened partnership between the City of Toronto and UWGT<br><br>• Strengthened relationships and communication between the City of Toronto, UWGT, and community agencies<br><br>• Better understanding of community needs | • Increased sense of solidarity and support within the sector<br><br>• Highlighted relevance of the sector<br><br>• Highlighted need for the sector to engage more in collaborative advocacy and systems level work<br><br>• Increased risk of burnout, as a negative, unexpected outcome of the CCP work |

# Conclusions and Lessons Learned

## 7.1 Conclusions

In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, UWGT and the City of Toronto recognized that community organizations had a unique and crucial role to play in responding to this crisis. These organizations could reach those who were most vulnerable quickly and find practical and innovative ways to respond. They could inform large, city-wide institutions about the impact of the pandemic in their particular neighbourhoods and inform their response.

At the same time, UWGT and the City of Toronto knew that many of these community organizations, and the people who worked in them, were themselves vulnerable in the face of the pandemic. They varied greatly in size and capacity. Some organizations, and some neighbourhoods, were better networked than others. Some smaller organizations did not have strong existing relationships with either lead organization.

In order to shore up the city's community social services infrastructure so that it could focus its unique strengths on the crisis, the CCP was launched. The CCP's cluster approach was introduced to strengthen predictability, community response capacity, coordination and partnerships between community agencies, the City of Toronto and UWGT as they responded to the pandemic. This in itself is a notable achievement. Many staff members at the City of Toronto, at UWGT, and in community organizations worked incredibly hard under very difficult circumstances to make the CCP a reality, and they deserve to be congratulated. They stepped into unfamiliar roles, dealt with extraordinary unknowns and opened their doors willingly to new kinds of collaborations. Politicians and other senior leaders quickly threw their support behind the plan.

The feedback gathered through this evaluation project makes it clear that the CCP improved the capacity of Toronto's network of community agencies to support vulnerable populations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participating community agencies, UWGT, and various departments at the City of Toronto were more informed about the evolving crisis, its impact on the health and well-being of city residents, and the best steps to take to respond. Through the CCP, community agencies were better able to access relevant information, funding and other resources, and they developed stronger partnerships with one another.

The City of Toronto and UWGT built stronger working relationships with community organizations, and also with each other. Through the CCP, partners used this increased capacity to take new and innovative forms of actions in neighbourhoods across the city - and they did it together in a more coordinated way. These actions have made a difference for the residents of Toronto, who gained more timely access to important information and were linked to services and supports they needed.

## 7.2 **Lessons Learned about how to Support the Community Service Sector during a Crisis**

A number of lessons have emerged from this evaluation process about what is important to support the community service sector while responding to a crisis:

- It is important that the response to the crisis is driven by leaders who have a strong understanding of the circumstances facing the community sector, as well as its multitude of strengths, skills and abilities. Furthermore, it is important for this understanding to inform the design of the response to the crisis, as well as a vision of what is possible to achieve through this response. Effective leaders to drive the community sector's response to the crisis have:
    - o Credibility within and knowledge of the community
    - o The ability to motivate others and share power
    - o A strong belief in the ability of the community sector to take action
    - o An openness to learning and the ideas of others
    - o The ability and willingness to build community ownership and relationships
    - o The ability to leverage resources and funding.
- It is important that the response plan clearly states mandate, scope and roles to help set up realistic expectations and enable a good prioritization process for

the community issues that need to be resolved. The function of the plan is to ground activities and encourage participation but also to allow for adjustments and adaptations to the changing conditions and community needs.
- Establishing good communication between multiple stakeholders and building a good information infrastructure to support it is essential. Good communication:
    - o Is a two-way process which is open and flexible and uses a variety of communication modes to be as clear and straightforward as possible
    - o Occurs with a frequency that aligns with the informational needs of the stakeholders
    - o Allows community agencies to participate in setting the agenda and to be heard
    - o Strives for transparent sharing of all available information
    - o Strives for inclusion and equity.
- A non-hierarchical "network" structure of interconnected partners, where various kinds of leaders can take actions in many different ways, and roles can be reorganized as issues and interests change, is more effective than a top-down, rigid, "organizational" structure. This is true within an initiative like the CCP, but it is also important to foster strong networks of connections between the CCP and other groups taking actions to respond to the crisis in the city.

- Being willing to make the changes necessary to ensure a rapid response is key. The CCP demonstrated the ability of senior leaders at UWGT, and especially at the City of Toronto to find ways to circumvent existing bureaucratic processes in order to share resources quickly and enable community agencies to deliver services and respond to the identified needs in their communities in a timely fashion.
- Working cross-functionally and developing strong working relationships is important, as well as building on diversity to find a common ground. In the CCP, smaller and bigger community agencies, along with experts in a wide range of fields, ranging from infection control, health promotion and human resources to fundraising, food system management, housing, youth employment and support services for seniors worked together closely. This was essential to developing solutions and action plans to address multiple issues across the city. Good cross-functional work requires establishing inclusive processes that:
    - o Respect differences
    - o Create a safe space for sharing concerns and providing input
    - o Encourage asking questions and looking for solutions rather than imposing answers
    - o Offer a variety of opportunities for participation.
- Valuing and enabling learning and problem solving is important to maintain the community sector's

motivation, commitment and power to act. The CCP did not place constraints on the discussion at tables, and that meant that participants could discuss very practical needs as well as complex systemic issues, as needed. Senior leadership was open to receiving all feedback. Critical reflections on the CCP process were frequent and ongoing at all levels and they were used to inform the CCP's further development. Efforts were made to document the process throughout.
- Staff burnout can be a serious issue during the crisis. Built-up stress caused by the unknowns of the crisis and the overwhelming demands for services can leave service providers battling extreme exhaustion and lead to serious mental and physical health issues. It is important to make sure that the service providers feel supported and have access to resources and strategies to help them with fatigue, stress and uncertainty.

### 7.3 Lessons Learned to Support Community Development Work beyond the Crisis

The struggles and successes of the CCP have shed new light on some of the city's long-standing challenges. The CCP demonstrated the power of collective community development and the readiness of the community service sector to take collective action to address complex social issues. In the ongoing effort to build strong neighbourhoods and make meaningful progress on the city's most complex social

issues, the CCP's experience also offered some useful insights into community development work. In addition to the lessons about how to support community service sector during the crisis, success in community development work focused on more long-term solutions may depend on some of the following factors:

- Building and maintaining momentum, motivation and commitment long-term. A shared sense of urgency caused by COVID-19 triggered a special sense of connection, solidarity and trust between stakeholders. It also helped mitigate typical power dynamics between the community agencies and UWGT and the City of Toronto as their funders. It also motivated stakeholders to work in a more coordinated and collaborative way and increased their commitment to find common ground and respond quickly to support vulnerable community members. Maintaining this momentum outside a time of crisis can be challenging and require thoughtful planning and targeted effort. The role of leadership and partnerships in which the vision, workload, responsibilities, risks and benefits are shared, joint investments of resources are made, and capacity building opportunities are offered are critical in addressing this challenge.
- Developing comprehensive strategy to guide the community development work is important, but the process of cultivating inclusive relationships is equally, or even more important. While

those involved with the CCP did find it frustrating when the purpose of the initiative wasn't sufficiently clear or the roles of specific tables were not consistently understood, the fuel that powered the CCP was the trust and understanding that developed at cluster tables. Success in this work requires good support structure, reliable funding, and good communication, a team skilled in network weaving and with a genuine care for their community, facilitation of collaborative planning processes, and anti-oppressive approaches focused on equity and justice. It requires an approach to grant making that is trust-based, and less focused on narrow conceptions of accountability and reporting.

- Progress requires more intentional multi-modal responses. Through the CCP, it became clear that discussion of complex systemic issues is an important step in the process of developing practical front-line neighbourhood strategies, and vice versa. It was also clear that open discussion and collaboration with stakeholders who have very different kinds of professional expertise and/or lived experience is crucial. The connections between grassroots resident engagement, collaborative, place-based planning in the community service sector, the work of local, provincial and federal government, and systemic advocacy need to be better understood and included to support community development work.

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